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# Unusual leader for college

## Reflecting his atypical path, SCC chief focuses on underdogs

By Eric Stern -- Bee Staff Writer

Published 12:01 am PDT Sunday, July 2, 2006  
Story appeared in Metro section, Page B1

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Sacramento City College President Arthur Tyler, right, talks with Rick Ida, associate vice president of instruction, during a planning meeting last week. Tyler came to SCC a little over a year ago, after administrative stints at Los Angeles City College and Compton Community College. Sacramento Bee/Randy Pench

Two things stand out in Art Tyler's dissertation topic for his doctorate, an analysis of training for "new California community college CEOs."

The first is that Tyler refers to community college leaders as something more akin to the corporate world -- chief executive officer -- instead of the traditional title of a campus head, president.

The second is that Tyler, the president of Sacramento City College, is still working on his doctorate.

Little is typical about Tyler's path to Sacramento or his approach to the job, and the people around him attribute that to his strength and vision.

"He's not quote-unquote one of us," said Dr. Mark Drummond, chancellor of the state's community college system, who began teaching at age 24 and rose through the college administrative ranks. "We need different people to bring in a different set of eyes."

Tyler, 56, grew up straddling the poverty line in Washington, D.C. He overcame dyslexia, spent a lifetime traveling the world with the Air Force, then began a new career less than 10 years ago at a community college in Los Angeles. He arrived at Sacramento City College last summer.

"I probably shouldn't be a college president, given what I was facing," Tyler said in an interview last week. "I wasn't supposed

to make it."

But he has. And in some ways, the road to Sacramento leads back home. He's back in the shadow of a Capitol dome, just down the street from power brokers and policymakers.

Arthur Quinn Tyler grew up in Washington, D.C., the oldest of three children of divorced parents. His classmates were like him, black and poor, with few apparent prospects for a better life.

"There are a few who went off to war and came back and went to work for the Post Office, and they made it. That was making it," he said.

When he talks about overcoming obstacles -- and lifting people up -- he sounds a little like Colin Powell, the former military leader, U.S. secretary of state and mentoring advocate.

Powell's autobiography, "My American Journey," is displayed on the bookshelf in Tyler's office. Like Powell, Tyler is a registered Republican.

Reading came slowly for Tyler. He would tangle up the words and numbers on the page and had to work at overcoming his dyslexia.

"I created my own defensive mechanisms," he said. "I started memorizing everything so kids wouldn't laugh at me."

A high school coach inspired him to work even harder in class. Tyler sees his perseverance as a symbol of the community college mission -- especially at Sacramento City College, which plays host to a racially diverse campus of 22,000 students, including many first-generation college-goers from immigrant families.

"We don't give up on people," Tyler said.

Tyler started college after high school but was drafted in 1968 at age 19. His ROTC training in high school helped him stay stateside during the Vietnam War, mostly at an Air Force base in Arkansas working on Titan II missiles.

He remained with the Air Force for the next 20 years. His work led to the Middle East -- he learned to speak Farsi -- and he helped organize the evacuation of U.S. military families from Iran before the revolution in 1979. He later worked the anti-terrorism beat, developing relationships with Middle East countries to host potential U.S. military bases.

During that time, he chipped away at a college education, often taking one class at a time. He earned two associate degrees through the Community College of the Air Force and a bachelor's degree in business management from a University of Maryland satellite campus in Tehran at age 30. By 1984, he had a master's degree from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey. He was 34.

Tyler has spent the last two years working toward his doctorate at the University of Phoenix. He's hoping to finish next spring.

"It is in keeping with what I'm trying to inspire the students here to do, and that is to become a lifelong learner," he said.

He's researching how well new community college presidents are prepared to deal with the business side of running campuses, managing multimillion-dollar budgets and major construction projects.

After retiring from the military in 1989, Tyler worked in various private ventures in Southern California. In 1997, he was hired to apply his business acumen at Los Angeles City College, to straighten out the finances and fix up the neglected campus.

His work drew the attention of state officials, who tapped Tyler in 2004 as a troubleshooter when the state took control of financially struggling Compton Community College. Tyler spent the next 15 months as "special trustee" restoring order, at times with a California Highway Patrol bodyguard.

The task could have been a "career-ender," said Drummond, the statewide chancellor. Instead, "he made a lot of decisions that's turned that place around."

When Tyler left for Sacramento, the Compton Community College Foundation announced the creation of the Arthur Q. Tyler Scholarship Fund in his honor.

(While the school has improved, its accreditation still remains threatened, and the Legislature last week approved a \$30 million emergency loan for the campus.)

"The thing I like about him, he really gets it about opportunity," said Bruce Pomer, board president of the Los Rios Community College District, which oversees Sacramento City College.

In the past year, Tyler has risen from arguably the worst community college in the state to a top-tier one with strong graduation and transfer rates -- a landmark school founded 90 years ago that doesn't even resemble a junior college. Its brick buildings, with red-tiled roofs, are linked by covered walkways that surround a plaza where students lounge about and study.

Tyler wants to ensure the campus welcomes even those who need an extra hand.

"When you think about the number of kids who perhaps don't graduate from high school -- if they're 18 years old, they can come here," Tyler said. "We can transform them if they're willing to work hard, if they're willing to listen, if they're just willing to show up.

"We can find a way to help them find dreams that they never thought they had."

**PROFILE: Arthur Quinn Tyler**

President, Sacramento City College

**Salary:** \$153,328, plus \$500 per month for district travel and expenses. Age: 56.

**Education:** Associate degrees in police science and business, Community College of the Air Force; bachelor's degree in business management, University of Maryland; master's degree in national security affairs, Naval Postgraduate School; pursuing doctorate in management at University of Phoenix.

**Work experience:**

- Sacramento City College - August 2005 to present.
- Special trustee, Compton Community College - May 2004 to August 2005.
- Vice president of administration, Los Angeles City College - June 1997 to May 2004.
- Private business and consulting - June 1989 to June 1997.
- U.S. Air Force - December 1968 to June 1989.

**Family:** Married, three adult children.

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